

Conversations With: Dorothy Jones, Geneva Lee, Beulah and James Avery  
Place: Jourdain-Fleetwood Center, Evanston, IL  
Date of Conversation: 4 May 1983  
Listeners: N. Lawler, T. Welliver, D. Owusu-Ansah

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Observations: What follows is a partial transcript of a conversation which occurred at the end of an afternoon meeting of the Foster Club. We had concluded our formal interviews and were just chatting with several of the members, including Mrs. Jones who is president of the club. The conversation soon turned to a series of reminiscences which we were only able to partially record. Yet we judged them important enough to attempt a partial reconstruction. The parenthesis are ours.

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Dorothy Jones: (Indicating Foster School, now closed, which is adjacent to the J-F Center). A little Jewish boy told me they were going to move all the whites out of Foster. This was in 1924 or 1926. My mother was furious. She got me into Dewey School. It was a little harder there but I made it. I had no trouble with the white children except that some of them wouldn't hold my hand. We lived on Wesley, north of Emerson, but I went to Dewey. The district line was at Emerson. Another family built a house on the other side, then they (the school district) claimed the border had changed. My brother went to Foster, though.

James Avery: They sent all the boys (blacks) to Foster no matter where they lived. They didn't want them around the white girls. The girls (white) were fine - friendly until we got to high school. Then they didn't know you.

D.J.: The restaurants in Evanston were all segregated. One of the oldest - Cooley's Cubboard, didn't serve the colored. You could work there of course.

J.A.: We couldn't eat anywhere in Evanston - Even at the Dime Store lunch counter.

D.J.: There was a change in the Thirties, in Jourdain's time.

J.A.: Yes, we didn't have to sit upstairs in the theatre anymore. I sat on the main floor. It was years later that I realized that the best seats were in the balcony. We'd had the best view.

D.J.: Colored people lived all over Evanston; all over the downtown. But they tore down those houses.

J.A.: A lot of them lived by the tracks. In those days the tracks were elevated only up to Church St.--beyond that they were on the ground. When they elevated the tracks they tore down the houses. It was called "urban renewal."

Q.: (to D.J.) Were your parents born here?





D.J.: My parents came to Evanston in 1907 from Maryland. My father came with the president of N.U.

Geneva Lee: (Mrs. Lee is the 1983 Evanston Senior Citizen of the Year.) I think it was Harris.

D.J.: Yes, it must have been. We all lived upstairs in the coach-house. My father was Harris' cook. Later he worked at Willard Hall as the custodian - in these days they were called janitors. I loved that because I loved music. I used to help him so I could play the pianos at Willard.

Q.: Did you ever think of going to N.U. as a student?

D.J.: Oh no, it was too expensive. My sister went there for one year. In 1930, 31. She didn't like it. In gym she heard a white girl tell the others to kick her in the head (with the ball). So she went back to Wilberforce.

Q.: Where did you go to college? (to D.J.)

D.J.: I started at Kendall-at that time it was called the Northwestern Junior Collegiate College--in 1936.

Q.: What were the black-owned businesses that you remember?

D.J.: There was a beautiful press--the Twiggs printing press--right on Emerson St. I used to play with his daughter. Next door we had the Pollston funeral parlor; later the Mason funeral parlor. We used to go look at the dead people. Later there were Porter & Owen Undertakers. They were close friends of the family.

J.A.: We also couldn't use Evanston Hospital then except for an outpatient clinic. Mrs. Butler (Dr. Isabel Garnett Butler) started our hospital in a two-story house. All the white employers (of domestic servants) supported it. They needed a place for their servants "our Negroes" to come.

Q.: What if it was an emergency?

J.A.: Even if there was an emergency they sent you down to Cook Co.

D.J.: The black people are losing the things we used to have. We lost the Y.M.C.A., which had a better swimming pool than the one on Grove Street. When they closed the Emerson Street "Y" and sent the blacks over to the other one, it lost its appeal for the whites too. The Y.M.C.A. is no good anymore.

G.L.: It was Patten - the wheat king - that kept the hospital segregated. He gave them a lot of money every year so they would keep us out.

D.J.: In 1936 my sister was very sick. We took her to the clinic at St. Francis. They sent her to Cook County.

G.L.: You could only get into Evanston Hospital if your employer brought you. He would say: "This is my negro." They'd put you





in a separate room. My brother and I were there in 1915. We had typhoid fever. He died and I lived. I was there for 14 weeks.

D.J.: We were all born at home.

J.A.: That's right.

D.J.: Dr. Barry was so busy he made a mistake on my sister's birth certificate. He put "white" down as her race. She had a terrible time when she went to get her passport. She had to get an affidavit from her daughter swearing that she was black.

G.L.: Evanston was so segregated. We couldn't swim in the pool in high school until 1967. We couldn't live in the dorms at the university. I worked there so I know.

D.J.: Some of the folks at Garnett Place used to rent to black Northwestern students, because they couldn't live on campus.

Q.: What was Evanston's reputation among blacks?

Beulah Avery: It was the same as anywhere.

J.A.: There were no jobs for blacks regardless of qualifications. My wife tried for years to get jobs. She had the best qualifications but they wouldn't hire her because she was black. Finally she started as the secretary (school) under Dr. Nicholls. A better job opened up in the personnel department. She was recommended for it by Dr. Nicholls. They said she was over-qualified. Finally when she got the job, her boss had to prepare the other workers at the Administration building for six weeks. This was in 1963. She was the first black to work for the school administration.

B.A.: When word went around that there was a job in personnel, they tried to get someone (white) to apply so they didn't have to hire me. They did hire a white woman. She lasted three weeks. Then they offered it to me. I had the job for three years. Before I started my boss made me come in on Saturday - when none of the office staff was there - to show me around and explain the job to me. When I finally started, they (the staff) were all very nice. Of course, they were told to be nice.

G.L.: Blacks couldn't work in any of the stores in Evanston - except sometimes in the back. I was the first black to work at Wieboldts.

J.A.: It was really bad. I had a friend with very light skin who worked in an office in Chicago. One day her husband came to pick her up. She was fired immediately. They didn't want a white woman with a black husband.

(the conversation then turned to the school system.)

D.J.: Did Jim tell you about the 'alphabetical' seating in high school? (See interview with James Avery). I had a French teacher, Miss McNally who told us - all the blacks in one row. But she was a fair grader.





J.A.: About 90% of the blacks were in X-classes. They didn't like it, but most of them didn't fight it. You needed someone to fight for you.

Q.: We heard that they gave "work certificate" at Foster School.

D.J.: They used to give work certificates to kids who finished 8th grade (at Foster) they tried to encourage all the black kids just to get these certificates instead of diplomas. Miss Riley had them install washers and dryers in Foster. All the teachers would bring in their dirty laundry. This was supposed to teach the girls domestic skills. The parents were furious. They all went to the school and demanded that this 'class' be dropped. Their children weren't going to be doing teachers' laundry. This was in 1920. Another 'class' was cooking. The kids used to cook lunch for the teachers. That wasn't too bad. Learning how to cook was useful. It's not that the teachers are all mean, but they have to be set straight by the parents.

D.J.: I liked Evanston. It was a good place to live. Mr. Gill was a real estate agent. He was a good broker. My father bought our lot from him. He charged him \$1,000 more than the seller was asking. He got an extra thousand plus his commission.

Q.: Was he white?

D.J.: No, he was a black man. The house is out near the high school, on Dodge. It used to be a good neighborhood, but everything has changed.

G.L.: He was a nice man but not too honest.

(The discussion moved to economic conditions.)

D.J.: We had no problem with juvenile delinquents when we were young. The older children were always responsible for the younger ones. There was always room for extra children at the dinner table. We didn't have much but we shared what we had.

G.L.: There weren't too many really poor people in Evanston in the early 20's.

D.J.: Around 1925-26, there was some kind of relief - charitable agency - organized.

G.L.: In the building where Woolworth's is, this was a relief agency in 1925. One of the organizers was Mayola Smith. She's on the Levy Board now. (Levy Recreation Center in Evanston). There were hard times even before the Depression.

Q.: Do you remember the Crash?

D.J.: Yes, that was terrible. October 29, 1929. My father had to accept script from the renters. The people on relief got paid in script. You could use it at Kroger (grocery store).





Q.: Were blacks generally worse off?

G.L.: Blacks were no poorer than whites then. We were all poor during the depression.

D.J.: The first family I knew that was on relief had lost their father. He was killed. The city brought them food. Cracked wheat for cereal and bread. We got some too. I hated it. The same thing every day.

G.L.: They gave us sugar too. But it wasn't pure cane. They mixed it with powdered sugar and it wasn't as sweet.

D.J.: We lived on Garnett Place.

G.L.: That used to be Ayers Place. I think it was named after the Garnett Family - Dr. Garnett.

(Subsequent research was done by Mrs. Jones. Garnett Place was named after James Garnett, the first black soldier from Evanston killed in World War II.)

NO

